

**JOHN F. KENNEDY-INSTITUT
FÜR NORDAMERIKASTUDIEN**

ABTEILUNG FÜR KULTUR

Working Paper No. 108/1998

ISSN 0948-9436

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**Postcolonialism:
Exoticism in the Age of
Affirmative Action**

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Figueira

Postcolonialism: Exoticism in the Age of Affirmative Action

Let me try and describe a Westernized Indian woman with whom I ought to have a lot in common and whose company I ought to enjoy. She has been to Oxford or Cambridge or some smart American college. She speaks flawless, easy, colloquial English with a charming lilt of an accent. She has a degree in economics or political science or English literature. She comes from a good family. . .How lucky for me if I could have such a person for a friend! What enjoyable, lively times we two could have together!

In fact, my teeth are set on edge if I have to listen more than five minutes - yes, even though everything she says is so true and in line with the most advanced opinions of today. But, when she says it, somehow, even though I know the words to be true, they ring completely false. It is merely lips moving and sounds coming out: it doesn't mean anything, nothing of what she says (though she says it with such conviction, skill, and charm) is of the least importance to her. She is only making conversation in the way she knows educated women have to make conversation. And so it is with all of them. . .They know modern India to be an important subject and they have a lot to say about it: but though they themselves are modern India, they don't look at themselves, they are not conditioned to look at themselves except with the eyes of foreign experts whom they have been taught to respect. And while they are fully aware of India's problems and are up on all the statistics and all the arguments for and against nationalization and a socialistic pattern of society, all the time it is as if they were talking about some other place - as if it were a subject for debate - an abstract subject - and not a live animal actually moving under their feet.

Ruth Praver Jhabvala, Out of India

Teaching literary theory to undergraduates can often be more illuminating an experience than one might expect. Their insouciance, while it has its limits, has the benefit of bringing an instructor back from the limits of professional discourse. Embarrassing questions, like "Is this critic saying anything?" that

Figueira

many a graduate student would never dare voice in a seminar, are asked in all innocence. The undergraduate, unlike the graduate student and professor, still enjoys a world where one can believe in facts and answers. The professor then explains that literature, unlike the sciences, does not offer right and wrong answers. I am comfortable with this response. I find it less easy, however, to confront their blank looks when I have to tell them that the critical method we are investigating cannot (or has not been) defined by those who make it their business to practice it. To put it bluntly, I dislike introducing critical methods that defy definition.

I dislike teaching postcolonial criticism to undergraduates (or beginning idealistic graduate students) as there is no consensus by its practitioners themselves as to what constitutes their approach to reading texts from a postcolonial perspective, or even what constitutes the canon of criticism. What can one do with definitions that claim postcolonial criticism

covers all the cultures effected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 1995:2).

Or, postcolonial criticism

foregrounds a politics of opposition and struggle, and problematizes the key relationship between centre and periphery (Mishra and Hodge 1991: 399)

The critical milieu in which such theorizing has developed has

Figueira

largely avoided definitions. When they appear, they are constructed by editors of anthologies or secondary interpreters of key theorists who do not interrogate the methods, ideology and disciplinary politics that mandate the refusal to define postcolonial criticism in a clear and unambiguous way. Even when critics question the trajectory of postcolonial criticism, the interrogation becomes an exercise in further theoretical obfuscation.

The critic Stephen Slemon has asked, Why are the attributes of postcolonial criticism so widely contested in contemporary usage, and its strategies and sites structurally dispersed (Slemon 1995: 7)?

Slemon offers two reasons for this apparent inability within the field to define its parameters. Either postcolonialism's meaning and moment should be read as the disciplinary manifestation of an intellectual paralysis in a cultural and critical moment that might have been or it represents a display of intellectual vitality in the production of new and diverse interventionary practices, new modes of resistance and representation and new spaces for the formation of coalitional transformations. I would counter Slemon's assessment of the problem by suggesting that the components of his equation have been misidentified. Although it is fashionable to speak in terms of "intervention" and "resistance," such terminology refers to no political or social reality, but function

Figueira

rhetorically. How then can we be asked to judge postcolonial theory in terms of its purely rhetorical gestures, as Slemon asks? I am suggesting that a critical moment has not been lost nor do we have a diversity of opinion regarding postcolonialism that is really vital.

Certain indicators lead me (and others) to question what is really going on. Why, for example has postcoloniality found such urgent currency in the First World and hardly a ripple resonates in the excolonized worlds of South Asia and Africa? What is behind the academic formation called postcoloniality and its complicity with certain forms of Eurocentric cultural theory (Radhakrishnan 1993: 750)? What power struggles are being replicated within this critical discourse? Does it represent nothing but a production of an comprador intelligentsia (Appiah 1992:149)?

Simply put, lack of consensus does not necessarily mean diversity or vitality. A serious analysis of this critical literature highlights the extent to which the intellectual rigor and development of the analysis are seriously circumscribed by ideological self-indulgence, reifying critical jargon and strategies of self-representation. It would appear that the failure to define postcolonial criticism displays far less the myriad problems of analyzing Third World societies and far more the complexity of the critics' projects and their games of identification.

At work in much of what passes for postcolonial criticism (or

Figueira

its less problematic moniker, colonial discourse analysis) is the old problem of the engaged intellectual and the pretense that academic criticism can function as a political act. To a certain extent activist culture has been displaced with a textual culture (Ahmad 1992:1). However, a rhetorical engagement does not present a blueprint for social change, particularly when critics are most often located far from the native sites they propose to analyze. I am not suggesting that the "(dis)location of the writer or critic" "be used as a means to discard his or her writings" or that if one is rooted to the territory of one's origin a "pure and authentic standpoint" is developed (Michel 1995:87). However, the problem is one of representation. Auto-minoritized (note: not necessarily minority) subjects assume roles as spokespersons for minority communities. Regardless of their own socio-economic status and privileges, they speak as/for minorities and as representatives for a minority community and its victimization. They function as "victims in proxy" (Bahri 1995: 73). This role is never seriously challenged. Spivak will, on occasion, voice concern that some critics might lack the objectivity to conceptualize their Dasein, as if by projection she is absolved of accruing any blame herself. This strategy of projection, utilized with such aplomb by Said to mask a multitude of sins, does not change the fact that victimization by proxy represents false consciousness.

Spivak theoretically defines the subaltern as one who cannot

Figueira

speak, effectively coopting the legitimate voice of the subaltern, creating a need for the theorist/critic (Spivak herself) who will determine the discourse of the victimized. This is, indeed, a slippery game. Laboring the notions of voicelessness and absence serves to license the neglect of any texts ("archives" and "voices") that contradict the theoretical script.

The concept of the margin versus the center in postcolonial criticism, as constructed upon Derrida's critique of logocentrism, allows the critic to theorize always from the impregnable position of "the margin" (location) but also to invoke "ambiguity", "binarism", and "splitting" etc as constitutive of that margin and those that inhabit it. Therefore, the theorist is not constrained to "stand" on particular ground or take up a position, but instead can "slide ceaselessly" (Bhabha 1990: 300). In Bhabha's work, Foucault is invoked to establish the disequilibrium of the modern state and Bhabha's conception of the marginality of the "people." Said and Bhabha accept Foucault's dubious claim that the most individualized group in modern society are the marginals, yet to be "integrated into the political totality (Foucault 1988:162-3, cited in Bhabha 1990: 302). They attempt to validate interpretation from the margin, where Third World intellectuals and metropolitan culture position exile figures as most authoritative voices. Said, in particular, positions the "migrant" or "traveler" as "our model for academic freedom" (cited in Krishnaswamy 1995: 127). Thus, the need for a "tribe of interpreters" (Bhabha 1990: 253) has been

Figueira

established. The migrant/ traveler interpreters can then set out on their annointed mission as the "translators of the dissemination of texts and discourses across cultures" (Bhabha 1990: 293).

Travelling theory will discern the "metaphoricity of the peoples of imagined communities - migrant or metropolitan. . ." This theory will require, among other things, "a kind of 'doubleness' in writing; a temporality of representation that moves between cultural formations and social processes without a 'centered' causal logic" (Bhabha 1990:293). Here, Said, Spivak and Bhabha can be "located" at a place where theorists are necessary to interpret across cultures and academic disciplines without the inconvenience of having to pinpoint cultural specificity. The rationale has now been created for the theorist to say whatever he or she likes, the only constraint, or test of validity being that the proper cultural space is occupied and that the writing validates and promotes the ambiguity and contradictoriness of this position.

The time has long passed when anyone seriously believes that the Third World can be solely understood in light of the types of analysis that are brought to bear on the colonial experience and texts (if and when texts enter into discussion). There is a limited range of inquiry that can be broken down into the following categories. Tracing Lacan back to Freud defines the spectrum of psychoanalytic readings. The concentration on psychoanalysis in postcolonial criticism accounts for its unabashed ahistoricism.

Figueira

Althusser and Foucault set the limits for discussion of power relations. With the fall of the Eastern block, Marxist presuppositions hover on the periphery, either in disguise or aggressively unrepentant. Aijaz Ahmad and Fredric Jameson are surprisingly refreshing: They at least believe in something, no matter how disputed. Jameson's one significant venture to retool himself as a postcolonial critic was, unfortunately, just wrong. Nevertheless, his analysis of national literature in the Third World is cited in homage to the once reliable now fallen system of value. Ahmad is also a refreshing Marxist voice, if only for his refusal to recant and retool himself, in the face of tremendous backpedaling on the part of many colleagues. Faulty arguments are, therefore, inconsequential if the critic's stance has been or is now sufficiently correct.

Westerners /Western-trained and -based Third World elites dominate the discourse; their language is based upon Western epistememes and their knowledge of the national literature or historical context is usually that of an individual who has trained in English literature and 20th century critical theory. What passes for a canon (I qualify the term "canon" as the number or authors examined is actually quite limited) exclusively focuses on English texts (Bahri 1995:75), as if these were truly representative of the postcolonial situation, ignoring (pace Spivak's Mahesweta Devi) vernacular texts that might not deal with colonialism.

Figueira

The starting point for any perspectivism is Marx, nothing earlier, as though earlier colonialism follows some pattern established by the modern configuration. Their theories are often at variance with the national historical situation and exegetical context. Little reference is made to culturally specific details. One colonial experience resembles another. Postcolonial prognoses are not only stripped of cultural specificity but actually have little to do with the Third World reality. History is divided into manageable and isolated segments based on the experience of modern colonialism, while at the same time, arguing against the false homogenization of orientalist projects (Bahri 1995: 52). Falsehood and fragmentary (acontextual) analyses are accepted out of a deep cynicism regarding the Other as an fossilized object of clinical experimentation.

In The Exotic, a Decadent Quest, I defined nineteenth century European metaphorical journeys eastward in terms of a "lack," desire/disavowal, and failed hermeneutic. I would now like to question how much of postcolonial criticism differs from the model of nineteenth-century exoticism. In both instances, the reader/critic develops a personal agenda foreign to the objects of analysis. In both instances, the exotic Other appears to fill a lack perceived by the metaphorical traveler/critic. Most importantly, the demarcation between the self and the other continues to motivate the encounter. Both are animated by an identifying submission to an idealized Other. The critics

Figueira

indiscriminately embrace the Other and level out the various Others. All postcolonial experiences are the same, since their actuality is never taken seriously. The unfortunate Jameson must be called to task for assuming that all Third World narratives function in the same way as national allegories. What is important is that the Other always be perceived as correct, regardless of differences and histories and it must fulfil the critic's desire for a pure otherness in pristine luminosity (Chow 1995: 45).

In several important respects, however, this new critical exoticism differs from its nineteenth-century precursor. It contains no idealism and no secret search for origins. The personal search involved here is much more calculated. There is no unconscious enthusiasm masking a lack. The lack for the 20th-century fin de siècle critic consists of a lack of calling or significance. The search is for personal validation amidst values within an incestuously boundaried field, among other critics deemed worthy of making the call. The Other is eclipsed by the critic's conception of it. A conception whose major function is to validate the theorist within the community of theorists. Maybe their quest now is bound up in the idealized image of the critic's own theory or theory itself as idealized image. This is a new solipcism as well as an aestheticization of the critical project in "criticism for criticism's sake."

The purely aestheticized critical task has a good deal in common with much film criticism, jazz criticism and new art

Figueira

criticism. There is no clear critical canon, no need to be scrupulous or scholarly, no need for logic or rationality. In fact, demands for rationality are symptoms of the malaise these critics combat. Thanks to Poststructuralism, we need systems. Lévi-Strauss taught us that exceptions and inconsistencies can be irrelevant to overarching structure. Thanks to Derrida, we do not need facts. Thanks to De Man, we do not need history. Since the archive consists of a limited body of published texts in English, we do not need linguistic skills or the tools of an archivist. The archive is largely metaphorical. Limitations upon general theoretical self-indulgence have been neatly swept away. The discourse, thanks to Foucault, revolves around self-gratifying reveries on power relationships and the critical product becomes a language game among theorists.

Nineteenth-century exoticism pivoted around the binary of desire and disavowal, when reality did not live up to one's expectations. The new critical exoticism places desire on the level of the critic's need for validation. The Third World critic somehow should be uniquely positioned not only to explicate, but understand realities. Disavowal has nothing to do with a critic's complex over the realities not fitting one's expectations. Disavowal now functions as a kind of "bracketing" of the Third World reality before the argument begins. The critic's primary interest lies in structuring the Third World thematically for a milieu that consumes these structures. They usually do not

Figueira

question how in the professional lives there is a replication of structures on which imperialism was based and functioned. Ashis Nandy was correct when he described them as "circus-trained opponents" and "tragic counterplayers performing their last gladiator-like acts of courage in front of appreciative Caesars" (Nandy 1983:xiv) . There is money to be made for even the most dyed in the wool unrepentant Marxist or academic heir to a business fortune.

Nineteenth-century exoticism originated from the priority given to the Other's inability to fulfil desire. Twentieth-century critical exoticism does not set such a priority. The agenda is elsewhere - not in the lack that animates the quest itself but in the impotency of the critic her/himself. The date is long past for criticism to have social impact. So now, criticism has built the whole critical project as an investigation of socio-political impotence. Where does potency lie? Only in the critic's relationship to colleagues, only in the critical milieu.

A new wrinkle in the twentieth-century critical exoticism is its reliance on the aesthetic in the form of theorizing for theory's sake. Texts often recede completely. I had a colleague in New York who proudly maintained that she did not teach literature anymore. Texts only entered into class discussions to illuminate the critical theory that she liked best. In the heyday of deconstruction, that made for a very limited corpus, indeed. The coining and usage of jargon becomes increasingly important, an

Figueira

exercise in pyrotechnics. The dexterity of language manipulation garners the critic points in the rarefied linguistic game, silencing those who cannot muster the energy or refuse to talk that talk.

In defense of postcolonial criticism, it certainly mirrors a certain struggle within the trenches of academe. To paraphrase the demonized poster boy of this discourse, V.S. Naipaul (in reference to Western 60's radicalism), the identification with the other provides certain unimaginative types with an easy way of making themselves more interesting to themselves and others. Across American culture and certainly across Indian caste groups, there is a deep feeling that ground has been lost by those segments of the population who are used to garnering the advantages of privileged status within their respective societies. Affirmative action has hit everyone hard. Whites in America and brahmins in India cannot expect doors to open as easily as in the days prior to Affirmative Action and the Mandal Commission. Brahmin academic displaced persons adopt the minority status of African Americans. As Spivak put it in one of those embarrassingly transparent gestures of self-conscious outrageousness: "In the third world no one gets off on being third world." I suppose that's why some write theory elsewhere. So many people have to hitch a ride on the minority bandwagon.

Elites from the excolonial world, possessing a deep sense of self-worth and further legitimized by an Ivy League/Oxbridge

Figueira

education, are "at the ready to step in in the name of affirmative hiring." "Highly commodified distinguished professors" "rack up points" on university administrators' "score card of cultural diversity." This is not inherently evil except when "academic gestures of acceptance of visible difference presented by displaced Third World postcolonials" mask "the continued disenfranchisement of second and third generational American minorities" (Bahri 1995: 71). Legitimate minorities learn early on how disastrous it is professionally if they don't walk that minority walk. Theories of the margin provide the rationale and its practitioners the personnel to undermine affirmative action.

It is, indeed, ironic that the discourse of decenteredness makes possible the direct transfer of the Third World elites to American elite positions and that the discourse of marginality serves to center these theorists in remunerative posts in the metropolitan center. It is no wonder that postcolonial criticism's "strategies and sites [are] structurally dispersed" (Slemon 1995:7) when the "tribe of migrant/traveler interpreters," all deconstructionists of hegemony, have constructed the theoretical priority of the margin (its position as the only authentic voice and its supremacy over any competing voices) in order to establish a location of power.

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Figueira

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